

Rough Guide to Coalition Government – lessons from the Institute for Government and Constitution Unit’s reports – Dr Catherine Haddon, Institute for Government

This guide is about managing coalition government. It is a brief summary of some of the main lessons on this from two reports by Dr Ben Seyd of the Constitution Unit in 2002 and 2004, and additional reports by the Institute for Government and Constitution Unit.^{1,2} The guide is not intended as a substitute for the full reports, but does seek to distil the main messages about managing coalition government as they apply to the 2010 Lib-Con coalition agreement.

There are many lessons that the current UK coalition government can learn from other countries, and already there is evidence of it having taken on board the experience of the devolved UK administrations in Scotland and Wales. However, a coalition in the context of modern UK government and Civil Service is breaking new ground. As the government goes forward, two of the most important features will be trust between the parties, and the ability and resources available to adapt the mechanisms as new challenges arise.

General conclusions

Coalition management is not something that can be achieved solely by a formal agreement – it requires continuing coordination, negotiation and compromise between the partners.

Coalitions depend on a mixture of formal structures and informal devices (which vary depending on the political culture and structure of the particular country). The most important is trust and a consensual approach to negotiations.

The form of coalition government

The UK political culture and system means that the coalition government appears to veer towards a form of coalition government in which the two parties blend their policies and actions into a single government approach, but maintain their independent party identity (for example by intending to campaign at by-elections separately).

There will be collective cabinet responsibility, rather than policy opt outs (which some countries use). Policies will therefore be attributed to the government collectively, rather than there being policy ‘wins’ for each party. There will generally be strict legislative discipline, unless specifically exempted in the agreement when the parties will be afforded free votes.

Pooled ministries

The 2010 Lib-Con coalition government is formed of ‘pooled’ ministries, which contain junior and senior ministers from different parties, rather than ‘segregated’ ministries where departments only contain ministers from one party.

The pooled option has two main benefits;

- It keeps each partner in touch with what the other is doing throughout all departments.
- It brings the different perspectives of the coalition together consistently, thereby reinforcing coalition management and agreement day to day.

But this option also has drawbacks. Segregated ministries allow parties to clearly present their policy achievements to the electorate.

It will be a constant challenge to make the pooled ministries work in practice. Personal relationships within departments will be important and trust will be crucial. Examples of the pooled system elsewhere in the world show the danger of senior and junior ministers from different parties fighting for control of the policy-making and decision-making processes. This is not wholly new; it can affect a department under a single party majority if the members of a ministerial team reflect different factions of the party or clash as personalities (and has often been a problem in government transitions or reshuffles). Civil Servants will need a clear sense of the ministerial remits, and the processes of policy-making and of information dissemination, both within pooled ministries and across government.

Role of Deputy Prime Minister

¹ Peter Riddell and Catherine Haddon, *Transitions: Preparing for Changes of Government* (Institute for Government, November 2009); Robert Hazell and Akash Paun (eds), *Making Minority Government Work* (Institute for Government/ Constitution Unit, December 2009)

² Ben Seyd, *Coalition Government in Britain: Lessons from Overseas* (Nuffield Foundation/ Constitution Unit, 2002); Ben Seyd, *Coalition Governance in Scotland and Wales* (Nuffield Foundation/ Constitution Unit, 2004)

Deputy Leaders, often the party leader of the junior partner in the coalition, have a crucial role to play in managing the coalition, but this is often the most difficult role to properly resource. There can be difficulties in keeping abreast of, and coordinating, business across departments – this can be a problem for prime ministers under single party majorities.

International examples vary in whether the deputy leader has a full departmental portfolio, or a crosscutting portfolio. If deputy leaders are given a departmental role it can often overload them – sometimes a quieter role allows for junior partners to make a fuller contribution across departments. If the deputy leader does not have a ministerial role, this can mean that there are insufficient resources available to them. Both Ireland and New Zealand do ensure resources are allocated to the deputy leader for this purpose. It is vital for deputy leaders to find a balance between their ministerial and cross-departmental roles.

Strict information sharing mechanisms, mirroring the Prime Minister's scope, can help, but, again, can lead to overload for the Deputy Leader as it does for prime ministers. The UK coalition does seem to have considered this issue. In addition to his own portfolio, the Scottish Secretary Danny Alexander has been specifically tasked with providing ministerial support to the Deputy Prime Minister.

Coalition Management

There are different components to coalition management: information exchange, inter-ministerial coordination, collective structures and dispute resolution. If there are good relations, trust and alignment of ideology between coalition partners, extensive coordination or management structures are less important. It is important to find a balance between informal relations and formal structures.

Information exchange

Other countries vary in the degree to which they go beyond normal cabinet requirements for information sharing and consultation arrangements to ensure each knows what the other partner is doing.

Some countries achieve this by ensuring that all important documents and draft policy papers are copied to both the leader and deputy leader of the coalition.

The emphasis on information sharing means that the exchange of papers should go beyond normal Cabinet or departmental practices but this will also take longer and will be difficult if papers are circulated to Cabinet at the last minute.

Inter-ministerial coordination

It is important to decentralise inter-ministerial coalition coordination to ensure that bottlenecks do not occur at the centre – this is one reason why pooled ministries can be beneficial. In this structure, ministers have dual roles; representing their party and representing their ministry.

Ireland experimented with Programme Managers, senior figures from inside and outside the civil service supporting ministers in ensuring implementation and coordination.

Collective coalition management structures

Coalition policy and decision-making often involves greater discussion and dissent than under a single party majority, so it can take much longer.

Coalitions with low trust levels are more likely to resort to a formal structure, but they are still useful in any scenario for good coordination and communication. They are also more useful to coalitions which involve a large disparity between the sizes of the partners. Such structures need to be separate from the Cabinet and Cabinet Committee structure, both because coalition management is different from the role played by Cabinet committees, and because it would overload an already busy Cabinet.

Special Advisers

The role of special advisers can be especially important as a means of reducing the burden on ministers. This includes the role of special advisers in assisting individual ministers with coordination and information sharing.

Special advisers are also especially important as an additional resource for the deputy coalition leader and some countries have a pool of special advisers at the centre for overall coalition management.

Dispute resolution

With these structures in mind, dispute resolution will often involve three levels, though the use or influence on them varies depending on far the coalition relies on formal or informal coordination:

- Inter-ministerial coordination.
- Collective structures
- Leader-Deputy leader axis.

Collective structures specifically designed for political management are usually separate from Cabinet. Many countries resort to such bodies as the last resort for dispute resolution, preferring the Leader-Deputy Leader axis first. For the 1977-1978 Lib-Lab Pact this was used second, before any dispute reached the leaders.

The Lib-Con coalition has also set out in its coalition agreement the use of commissions to further examine policy areas which have not yet been fully resolved.

Parliament

Party discipline mechanisms are an important component of maintaining the coalition. Other mechanisms in the executive – pooled ministries, coalition governance and dispute resolution processes – depend on ensuring this follows through into the legislature. Again, obviously single party majorities can have this same problem.